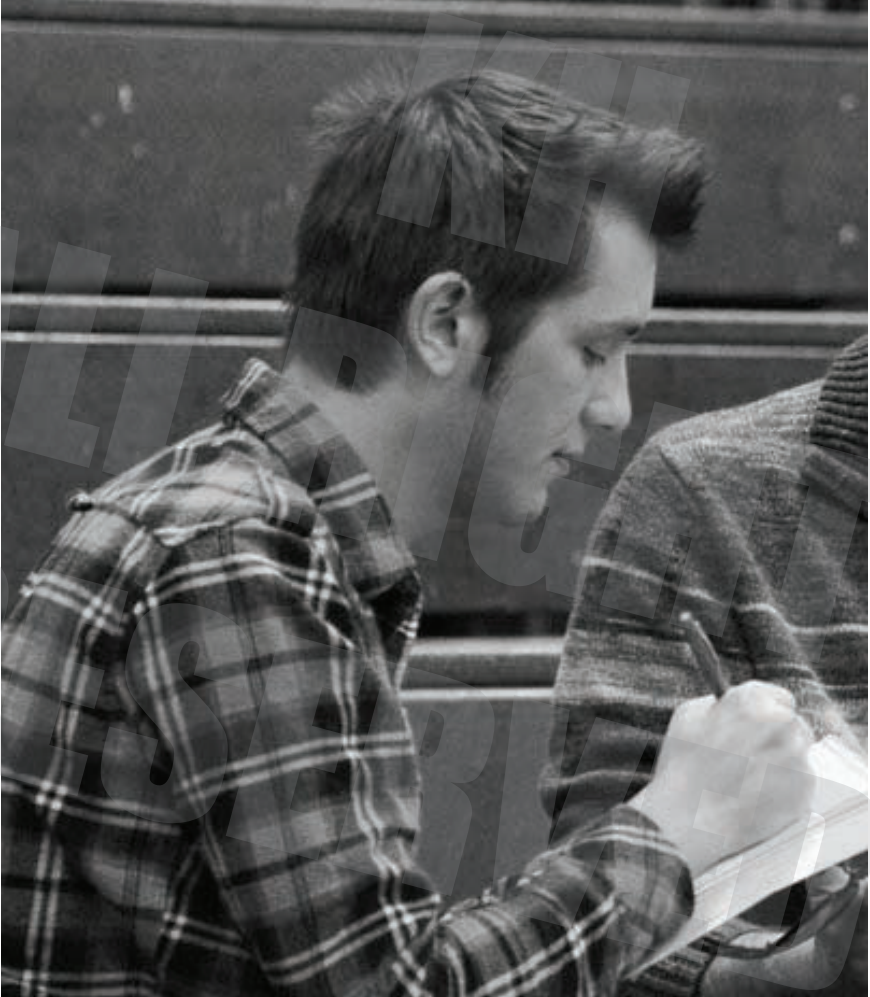


# Chapter 1

## The Basics



Courtesy of Jesse Bair

To tell a story, you have to start at the very beginning. To tell a journalistic story, you need to start with the basics. Once you master all the elements of basic journalistic writing, you can craft compelling and interesting stories. But it takes work and a lot of practice. Becoming a great journalist, and not just a mediocre one, takes time.

Think of a news story as a cake – you need to gather the ingredients, mix them correctly and bake them for the right amount of time for it to be done. And edible.

There are three main ingredients to any kind of journalism story: the LEAD (sometimes spelled lede), the NUTGRAPH and the KICKER.

The LEAD is the very beginning of the story or news broadcast. It is the first thing the audience reads, sees or hears. It must be correct, concise and sometimes clever.

Here is a lead from Lane DeGregory of the St. Petersburg Times about a kind-hearted mailman.

*On his day off, the mailman returns to his route.*

*He drives a beat-up Cherokee with a homemade trailer hitched to the bumper, parks in front of the little blue house on a corner lot tangled with weeds.*

*He carries no mailbag. He has nothing to deliver. Except his time.*

DeGregory, an award-winning writer, goes on to describe how the mailman cuts the lawns of all the elderly residents along his route. A lazy journalist (or one with not much talent) might have written a lead like this:

“A Florida mailman mows the lawn of senior citizens on his day off.”

Snore. What is clever or interesting about that? Leads must grab readers and hold their interest.

In 1995, a South Carolina mother went on trial for the drowning of her two little boys, whom she claimed had been carjacked. It was a lie. Rick Bragg reported on the story for the New York Times and covered the murder trial and murder conviction of Susan Smith. This is his lead from the subsequent murder trial story about Smith's sentencing:

*A jury today decided that Susan Smith should not be put to death for the drowning of her two young sons and instead should spend the rest of her life in prison, remembering.*

The key to the lead, in my opinion, is the comma after the word “prison.” It allows the reader to pause and think about the dead little boys and how their mother would spend the rest of her life with their memories and the horror of what she did.

After a great lead, a story needs a NUTGRAPH. That is a paragraph or sentence that sums up the entire story. The nutgraph must go up high in a news story – at least by the fifth paragraph or so. It can be delayed in a feature story. The purpose of the nutgraph is to quickly sum up the story so that the reader or viewer can get the gist of the story quickly. After the nutgraph, the

story can continue chronologically. Forgetting to write a nutgraph is one of the most common mistakes made by beginning journalism students. Here is the nutgraph in the Susan Smith sentencing story:

“It took the jury two and one-half hours to reject the prosecution’s request for the death penalty and settle on a life sentence. The jury’s unanimous decision saved Mrs. Smith, 25, from death row, but left her alone in a tiny cell with the ghosts of her dead children, for at least the next 30 years.”

Once the story is written, the reporter must focus on the KICKER. That is the very last sentence or paragraph of a story or broadcast. It is the last thing a reader will grasp before the story is done. Don’t just let the story trail off – save a really good quote or detail for the kicker. Here’s another tip – write the kicker first and then go back and write the story. But whatever you do, make sure that there is something interesting at the very end of your story. Don’t just suddenly...stop.

Here is the next set of “ingredients” needed to create a successful news story: Who, What, Why, When, Where and How. This sounds rather basic and it is. But too often beginning journalism students overlook these important elements.

Say that you are doing a story for the college newspaper about a student government meeting and a proposed tuition hike. A reporter needs to get ALL the details and include them in the story, or else it simply won’t be complete.

- **WHO:** The students at the college. The student government officers.
- **WHAT:** A meeting to discuss a tuition hike.
- **WHY:** Students need to know the specifics of why the tuition increase is needed. Is the money going to build a new football stadium? Are there less students enrolling? Is it because of a faltering economy?
- **WHEN:** Let readers or viewers know when the meeting occurred. Make sure to explain the exact time frame of the tuition increase.
- **WHERE:** Don’t forget to name the college.
- **HOW:** Get the specifics on how much money the tuition increase will raise (revenue) and how much the college will spend (expenditures). Give students information about student loans if they need additional financial aid.

All stories – even ones about college tuition hikes – need QUOTES from people involved. Readers and viewers want to know what other people think. They want to know what officials and experts think about a certain subject. This is where quotes come in.

The most important thing for a reporter to remember that a quote is what is said EXACTLY as it comes out of the person's mouth and is written down verbatim. Only then can it be called a quote. If you are just writing down the gist of what a person says, but not the exact words, then that is known as "paraphrasing."

It is important to distinguish quotes from other information in your notes. Mark the quotes with quotation marks or underline them. Do NOT mix them all together and hope you will remember later. If you are writing a story that requires the submission of your notes to an editor or fact checker, be aware that the quotes must be identified as such.

Here is a good quote from Lane DeGregory's story about the helpful mailman, Eric Wills:

*"A yard is a reflection of the person who lives here," Wills says. "So why not help them feel better?"*

The quote helps to illuminate the story and explain Wills' motivation. It is important to note the punctuation around the quotation. Use quotation marks at the beginning of the quote, a comma at the end of the phrase, then quotation marks again. The comma goes INSIDE the quotation mark. The attribution (he says or he said) goes at the end of the quote – not at the beginning.

Here is a quote from the story of the sentencing of convicted murderer Susan Smith, after she was sentenced to life in prison for killing her two little boys:

*"This young woman is in a lake of fire," said (her) lawyer, David Bruck. "That's her punishment."*

Once again, the quote adds context to a very sad story.

Some beginning journalists are very shy or lack confidence in talking to prominent people, like defense attorneys or politicians. Instead of doing the interview in person or on the phone, they try to conduct their interviews completely through email. DO NOT DO THIS.

First of all, it is really inefficient. Most people get so much email that the message from you could get lost in the shuffle. Secondly, email interviews don't convey either tone or context.

The best way to do an interview or get quotes is in person, with a phone interview the next best way. If you are nervous, picture yourself as a super hero – Reporter Gal or Reporter Guy. You can even have a cape. Reporter Guy and Gal are confident and talented. They can handle any interview.

Also, write down questions and notes before you pick up the phone or interview someone in person. Make sure you have researched the subject so you will be knowledgeable. If you don't understand what the person tells you, ASK QUESTIONS. It is okay to do so.

A reporter gets quotes by asking questions and listening to the response. Try not to do all the talking. Make sure you get the person's first and last

name (make sure they spell it) and their job title, if it is relevant. Often, an editor will want you to get the person's age or hometown as well.

The best ideas are ones that journalists come up with themselves. Some story ideas will be assigned to you, but most will come from your own reporting and knowing the beat. If you are covering the local high school's baseball team for a weekly newspaper, you would get to know the names of the coaches and players, plus their statistics and game schedule. Therefore, you would know that the team making the state playoffs would be a good story.

But what IS news and how do journalists know when something is a story? They assess the NEWS VALUES – the elements involved which determine if something is worth reporting on:

- **TIMELINESS:** Did it happen recently? Remember it is called “news” and not “olds.”
- **IMPACT:** Will affect many people? A hurricane has a lot of impact and so does a tax increase for the middle class.
- **PROXIMITY:** An event that happens nearby. For a local weekly newspaper, that means news in that county or town. For a large daily newspaper, this News Value expands out to a large city area or region.
- **PROMINENCE:** If someone famous or notable is involved, the story is most likely news – even if the action isn't that important.
- **CONFLICT:** Wars, riots, sports rivalries and political clashes are all examples of conflict
- **ODDITY:** Is it weird, funny or just plain strange?
- **VOICE TO THE VOICELESS:** Sometimes a story is news simply because it is happening to a marginalized member of society. It is a journalist's job to give “voice to the voiceless,” as spelled out in the Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics. This means stories about immigrants, the homeless, mentally ill, abused children etc.

Once a reporter has done all the reporting and interviewing, it is time to write. The best way to combat nerves or writer's block is to create a computer file or document. Immediately start writing your most vivid impressions of what you just learned. Don't even look at your notebook.

Now, go through all your notes and create a system to organize them. Highlight the quotes, for instance or put a star next to an important fact. Think of good ideas for the lead, nutgraph and kicker. Do NOT sit there staring at a blank screen. Do NOT sit there waiting for the perfect lead to fall out of the sky. It won't. It is perfectly acceptable to start in the middle and write down, or start at the bottom and do the lead last. There are no rules, as long as the story gets finished and has structure.

Here is a good way to give structure to a story. I learned this at a writing conference from Rick Bragg, the former New York Times reporter who now teaches journalism in Alabama. It is called the FIVE BOX OUTLINE. Here it is:

Box 1: The LEAD. A good quote. First major point. Important details.

Box 2: The nutgraph. Second major point. More details. Another anecdote or quote(s).

Box 3: Third major point. Details. Boring But Important (statistics, facts, figures).

Box 4: Fourth major point. Details. Quotes.

Box 5: Wrap it up. The kicker.

Connect all the boxes with transitional words, like “and,” “meanwhile” or “next” and the story will come together. Outlines make the writing easier and the Five Box Outline is easy to follow.

# 10 Tips on *Mastering the Basics*

- Write a great **lead**, **nutgraph** and **kicker**.
- Make sure you sufficiently answered **Who**, **What**, **Why**, **When**, **Where** and **How**.
- Determine what makes the story news: **Timeliness**, **Impact**, **Proximity**, **Prominence**, **Conflict**, **Oddity**, **Voice to the Voiceless**.
- Make sure the story is **fair**, **balanced** and **accurate**.
- Get enough **quotes** from enough people.
- If you don't understand, ask more **questions** and do more **research**.
- **Discuss** the story with your editor before you turn it in.
- If you are nervous talking to strangers, pretend you are **Reporter Gal** or **Reporter Guy**, complete with a cape.
- Don't be lazy and do the interview by e-mail. Pick up the **phone** or better yet, go in **person**.
- Know that you will make mistakes. But if you **correct them** and **learn from them**, that will make you a better journalist.

**KH**

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## In-Class Activity/Homework

Get a news article from a newspaper, magazine or website.

What is the LEAD?

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What is the NUTGRAPH?

-----

What is the KICKER?

-----

WHO

WHAT

WHY

WHEN

WHERE

HOW

What NEWS VALUES are in the story?

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Now look through another newspaper, magazine or website. Write a LEAD that you like:

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Write a LEAD that is dull, boring or too complicated:

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Look for QUOTES.

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## Journalist Q&A



Courtesy of Jason Alt

### Charles W. Nutt

*Where did you work?*

Various Gannett newspapers in New Jersey and New York for 36 years. New York Times for a year and a half.

*What was your beat or job title?*

Primarily Editor and Publisher for Gannett newspapers. Copy editor on the metropolitan desk for the NY Times.

*Where did you go to college and what was your degree?*

B.A. in English from the University of Scranton and M.A. in journalism from Syracuse University. Davenport Fellowship in Economics Reporting at the University of Missouri.

*Did you work on your college newspaper or online news website?*

Managing editor of college newspaper. (No website in those days. No computers, in fact. Manual typewriters. And the printing company set copy on Linotype machines.)

*Did you have any internships? If so, where and what did you do?*

No internships, but a graduate assistantship at Syracuse, working as editor of newsletters and then a magazine for the New York State Publishers Association and the New York Press Association.

*When and where was your first journalism job? What is one thing you learned from it?*

Hired as a night suburban reporter for The Courier-News (Gannett Co.) in Bridgewater, NJ. I quickly learned that it's good to be tall. Those were the days when reporters had to type stories on sheets of paper (with two carbon copies) and then paste the sheets together in a roll. The night editor's rule for story length was that when you held the story at arm's length and let it unroll, it shouldn't touch the floor. That meant I got to write longer stories (I'm six feet tall) than my friend the police reporter (who was 5-foot-6).

*What was the hardest part of your first journalism job?*

Knocking on the door of a home where the son had just been murdered and asking the family members for a photo and information.

*Many beginning journalists get very nervous about their first assignments. Did you get nervous and how did you cope?*

No, surprisingly, I never felt nervous. Almost the opposite. I'm basically an introvert, so I had to become in effect a different person – sort of what I assume an actor does when taking on a new role.

*What is the worst part about being a journalist?*

Long, bad and unpredictable hours that were often out of sync with the schedules of my wife and four kids.

*What is the best part?*

Feeling that what you do makes a difference in the lives of individual people and the community at large.

*What advice would you give to a journalism major?*

I always told prospective hires that getting ahead in the news business is often a matter of luck, but you can put yourself in a position to be lucky. You do that by taking advantage of every opportunity that comes along. Try new things, whether you want to or not. You sometimes discover new skills or new interests that way. Then when a new opportunity opens up, you're in a position to know whether you would like it or not, and you can point to the experience you have had. I think that advice is especially good today when it's absolutely imperative for new journalists to be able to work in print and all forms of digital platforms.

*What would you tell yourself at the beginning of your career, if you could go back in time?*

Put more money into the 401-k :-)